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ABSTRACT

Professional psychologists considering becoming consultants to school systems need to address the problems of getting contracts, managing referrals, reporting results, and handling financial and legal matters. Contracts, in the author's experience, are won less by knowing administrators than by offering low prices and performing well on initial jobs, so that customers will recommend you to other school systems. Seminars or workshops could be used in training teachers to make logical and timely referrals of students to be evaluated. When reporting the evaluation results, a consultant should include only hard data and must stress that the report is only part of constructing a student's individualized education program. A consultant will need a bookkeeping and billing system and may have to meet licensing and other requirements, but should be aware that school systems often pay their bills very slowly. (RW)

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Privately Consulting to School Systems: Some Problems and Advice

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For those professionals who are interested in doing private consulting especially to school systems, a description of some potential problems are outlined. In addition, some suggestions and advice are offered for dealing with or avoiding such problems. Topics covered include: 1) obtaining school contracts, 2) obtaining appropriate referrals, 3) the consultant's role in the decision-making process, and 4) financial and legal concerns.

Privately Consulting to School Systems: Some Problems and Advice

For the past four years, I have been actively involved with a partnership which has sought contracts and provided psychological services to a variety of school systems. The services have primarily consisted of testing to meet the requirements of Public Law 94-142 and consultation regarding classroom management. During this period of time, the partnership has consulted to seven school systems which consisted of nine elementary schools, three middle schools, six junior high/high schools, one vocational school, and a sheltered workshop. A description of some of the experiences that I have had working with these systems should be useful to anyone considering the establishment of a private practice centered around school services.

How to Get School Contracts

Securing school contracts can be quite difficult even when you know important school officials. My partner and I were acquainted with a number of school officials; however, mere acquaintance did not secure contracts. Systems that have utilized the services of private practitioners or mental health clinics over a number of years often seem reluctant to make changes even when the services provided have been barely adequate. Therefore, we secured our first contract

by proposing to a superintendent a one year contract with a testing/consultation fee significantly below their present supplier's fee. Their supplier was the local mental health center, and their fee structures were common knowledge in the community.

The rest of our contracts were not solicited; rather, by doing a "good job" on our original contract, that system's superintendent told his colleagues about our services. Of course, over the past four years we have raised our fees somewhat but still charge a "fair" price for our services, which is attractive to budget-cutting superintendents.

Obtaining school contracts does not complete the story though, and the securing of such contracts certainly does not insure success. Often times during the past four years we have encountered difficulties which have caused both financial problems for us and also hindrances to our ability to deliver services. Some of the problem situations that we have encountered have been due to a lack of education or knowledge on the part of school personnel regarding the skills and capabilities of psychologists; while other difficulties have been due to a lack of preparation or interest on the part of those assigned to work with us. A number of problem areas will be explored and some possible solutions or suggestions for the novice private practitioner will also be offered to avoid potential difficulties.

Teacher Referrals

Receiving referrals from teachers is generally not a problem. After our psychological services have been made available to schools, there generally has been a good flow of referrals. Unfortunately many of the referrals have not been very appropriate. The kinds of referrals that one frequently receives are not always readily related to any apparent academic or behavioral problems. The systems that we consult to use a standardized sheet which allows the teacher to outline the following: 1) what the problem areas are, 2) when the problems occur, 3) what the student's strengths are, and 4) what kind of things have been done to remedy the difficulties. Probably two-thirds of the referral sheets we get do contain some meaningful information; however, about a third of the referral sheets often contain vague information which indicates that the teacher is really not sure what kinds of student problems should be referred. Many times we receive referrals which include the following as problem areas: 1) does not seem to be working up to potential, 2) seems to be in a fog, or 3) could do better if he or she tried harder. Also we receive too many referral sheets that state, "the student shows no particular strengths." So often one does not know precisely what kinds of problems to evaluate for unless further investigation is undertaken.

Another problem area involves the accumulation of referrals by principals or coordinators of special education. We have experienced this a few times. About three years ago, three different systems accumulated their referrals over a period of a few months. We were then suddenly hit with 140 student referrals during the last month of school, and of course the school officials indicated that all students had to be tested prior to the end of that school year. For months prior to this barrage, we constantly sought referrals. It was impossible to test all of these students in such a short period of time, and we tested most of them during the summer.

When establishing a practice within a school system, hopefully that system will have a competent coordinator of special education who can appropriately prioritize referrals. However, if you are receiving any and all teacher referrals, then you might consider offering a seminar or workshop which focuses on the process of making logical referrals which will allow the psychological evaluation to be a meaningful experience for both the tester and the testee. Finally, the test coordinator or coordinating person must be encouraged to supply you with a timely flow of referrals.

Scheduling of Testees

We have a variety of contact people in each school and system. Sometimes the contact person is a principal and sometimes a teacher, counselor, or secretary. The private practitioner must determine who will be a reliable scheduler

of appointments. Even now after four years, we still sometimes visit schools and the contact person is totally unprepared. Even prior notification makes little or no impact on some contact persons. They continue to be poorly prepared. We have actually spent as much as 30 to 40 minutes surveying schools for a test room. Often schools are filled to overflowing with students and personnel. Therefore, one can find himself/herself testing or counseling students in furnace rooms, cafeterias, closets, hallways, bathrooms, and other peculiar locations. If a suitable location is finally found, it probably is a good idea to continue to use the space or to remind the contact person that this is your preferred testing site. Another approach might be to determine if any of the school's personnel vacate their offices on a regular basis. Frequently, school nurses and speech therapists visit other schools, and their offices often can be utilized on those days when they are absent from the school.

Report Writing

Since becoming a professional psychologist over ten years ago, I have generally found that referral sources particularly appreciate my psychological reports if they reflect their particular beliefs pertaining to the subject of the report. However, sometimes reports do not reflect the desires or beliefs of those referring the clients. Initially when this

situation occurred, we were asked by a few school officials to "double check" our results or to reevaluate our findings. When and if this situation occurs you must indicate, in a diplomatic manner, that changes in a report must be supported by hard, psychological data. Also, school officials must be cognizant of the fact that their beliefs and findings regarding students are just as important as yours, the psychologist. They too are equal partners in any committee formulating an individualized educational plan for a particular student. After all, school officials and personnel deal with referred students everyday; the psychologist's contact with a referred student may involve only an hour or two.

Too frequently, some school systems or some school officials put an undue amount of importance on the psychological findings. Often, no one official is willing to make a decision regarding the actions to be taken with a student. Your report and impressions are thought by these types to be the last word. Therefore, you are thus the person who takes the "heat." In other words when parents and/or teachers start complaining, they are directed to the psychologist. The process of committee decision-making must be emphasized by the private practitioner. The process of having a committee meeting to evaluate the procedures to be followed with a child includes the expert opinions of others besides the psychologist. Those who see and work with the child on a daily basis must be encouraged to voice their opinions.

And yet another problem area regarding report writing is, "what kinds of information should be contained within the confines of the report?" We have experienced some difficulties with a few special education teachers who not only want the psychological data but also precise suggestions on teaching methods and materials. The psychological evaluations that we have done focus on: 1) intellectual functioning, 2) achievement levels, 3) perceptual-motor skills, and 4) personality information. Some of the instructors have wanted us to do their jobs by preparing via the report individualized educational programs including exact instructional methods, time periods for instruction, and the precise types of materials to be purchased and utilized. Such requests can go beyond the purpose of the psychological and may reflect the needs of a "lazy" instructor. The L.D. or E.M.H. teacher who works with the referred child everyday of the week should be capable of deciding whether flash cards should be used on Monday rather than Tuesday. Be sure and clearly indicate to those involved what types of data and suggestions will be provided by the psychological testing.

Financial Matters

As a private practitioner you will need to develop both a bookkeeping and a billing system. Simplified but well-

organized bookkeeping can be accomplished by purchasing either a monthly or weekly ledger. Most stationary or office supply firms carry such ledgers and frequently they are very instructive, in that, some list acceptable deductions. The process of billing will simply involve submitting a standardized form listing the services provided along with the fees plus a total. Always keep copies of your submitted bills for reference because school systems occasionally do make accounting errors.

If you intend to "live-on" or rely on the money that you earn from doing testing or from consulting to a school system, then you had better reconsider. All of the school systems that we have dealt with pay at very, very slow rates. Often the systems will not pay until they have received some special federal or state funding. One year, my partner and I did about $5,000 worth of testing for a system which covered the entire school year. We were paid in total at the end of the school year; ten months had passed from the first testing until the first and only payment.

If you intend to work full-time as a school consultant, then at least the first year consider the possibility of accumulating a store of money that you can use to pay your bills or consider a part-time position that will provide a regular salary. If you confine your work only to school buildings then your expenses will be minimal; however, if you intend to maintain an office, then a store of money or

a regular flow of money will probably be mandatory.

Legal Concerns

As a private practitioner, you may need to consider purchasing malpractice insurance. It may not be absolutely necessary, but in this litigious society of ours it should be considered. Members of the American Personnel and Guidance Association have available to them a reasonably priced liability insurance program, and there are numerous other programs available through independent agents. Also, you may find yourself subpoenaed to testify in a school hearing or a civil action as a witness for the school system. This situation will probably be very rare, but it does occur and can be extremely time consuming and unrewarding.

In addition, three other areas of concern border on the financial/legal aspects of operating a business. As a private business man or as a member of either a corporation or partnership, you may need to purchase a license to operate your practice within the boundaries of a city. Also, employee identification numbers should be applied for; these would be both federal and state. And finally since additional money will be made, the private practitioner will need to make quarterly estimates of additional federal and/or state income taxes to be paid.

Summary

Consulting to school systems can be fun, profitable, and very challenging. For those psychologists who hope to set-up either a full-time or part-time private practice, this information was presented to alert and prepare the aspirant for some of the potential problem areas. Establishing a successful consulting service is not easy, and it can be very frustrating and many times it is not as financially rewarding as one might think. Initially, one should seriously consider holding either a full or part-time job while offering services to schools on a part-time basis. This procedure could be followed until the private business is well established. Hanging-out a shingle and establishing a private business is not necessarily going to be a road to riches. It takes hard work, and one will continue to encounter a number of frustrating and difficult situations even after the private practice is well established. I wish you the best of luck.